

November sales boost may keep economy up

WASHINGTON (AP) — Energized shoppers boosted sales at the nation's retailers in November by the largest amount in three months, reinforcing the belief that consumer spending will keep the economy out of a new recession.

The Commerce Department report Thursday that retail sales in November were 0.4 percent higher than in October also raised hopes that the holiday shopping season will see people acting more like Santas than the Grinch some had feared.

Shoppers hit the stores with more enthusiasm in November than in the previous two months: Retail sales fell by 1.5 percent in September and edged up by just 0.1 percent in October.

"The urge to splurge started to creep back into consumers' spending patterns," said economist Joel Naroff of Naroff Economic Advisors. "The fears that households would not visit the malls appear to be unfounded."

Excluding automobile sales, which can swing widely from month to month, retail sales rose by 0.5 percent in November, a stronger performance than the 0.2 percent rise economists were forecasting.

Consumer spending accounts for two-thirds of all economic activity in the United States. It has been the main force keeping the economy going this year.

"Good retail sales are America's Christmas gift to itself," Commerce Secretary

Don Evans said of November's retail figures.

Tracy Mullin, president of the National Retail Federation, also was encouraged by November's retail report and predicted holiday sales this year would be around 4 percent higher than last year.

Low interest rates, tax cuts and extra cash from refinancing of home mortgages have supported consumer spending, helping to offset potentially negative forces such as a stagnant labor market and a bumpy stock market.

"We believe this infusion of cash can keep spending going through this winter," said Merrill Lynch economist Gerald Cohen. "But if consumer spending is going to continue to grow, the job picture needs to improve sooner rather than later."

The Labor Department reported new claims for unemployment benefits shot up by a seasonally adjusted 83,000 to 441,000 last week, the highest level since the middle of April. Analysts said the increase was exaggerated by seasonal adjustment problems, but they still predicted a sluggish job market in the months ahead.

On Wall Street, the Dow Jones industrial average closed down 50.74 points at 8,538.40.

The Federal Reserve left interest rates unchanged Tuesday, after slashing rates by a bold half-point at its previous meeting on Nov. 6. That was the first rate cut this year.

Home matters

With the comforts of home in mind, shoppers pushed sales of furniture and home supplies in November.

Percent change in retail sales from October to November, by category	Furniture
	+0.2%
	+0.2%
	+1.5%
	+0.3%
Motor vehicles	-0.1%
Sporting goods	-0.5%
Clothing	-1.3%

NOTE: Figures are seasonally adjusted and exclude price changes.

SOURCE: Department of Commerce

"A relatively aggressive action could help to ensure that the current soft spot in the economy would prove temporary and enhance the odds of a robust rebound in economic activity next year," the Fed said in minutes of the Nov. 6 meeting released Thursday.

In another report, the Fed's broadest measure of trade rose in the third quarter to \$1.1 billion, from a \$127.6 billion shortfall in the second quarter, Commerce Department said.

The "current account" measures not only the movement of goods and services between countries, but investment flows and transfers, including U.S. aid payments.

TV cameras banned in sniper case

MANASSAS, Va. (AP) — A judge Thursday barred television cameras from next year's trial of sniper suspect John Allen Muhammad, saying such media coverage could compromise his right to a fair trial.

Prince William County Circuit Judge LeRoy F. Millette Jr. also said trial would begin Oct. 14 and he set aside eight weeks for what is expected to be a closely watched case.

The Radio-Television News Directors Association said it was considering an appeal.

"It is unfortunate that the most neutral and accurate means of presenting the trial has been banned," said Barbara Cochran, president of the association.

Muhammad, 41, is charged with capital murder in the death of Dean Harold Meyers of Gaithersburg, Md., who was shot Oct. 9 while fueling his car at a gas station in Prince William County.

Meyers was one of 13 people hit — 10 fatally — by sniper fire during a three-week shooting spree in suburban Washington, D.C. Muhammad and 17-year-old John Lee Malvo are suspected in all 13, as well as eight other shootings across the country.

The youngest victim of the spree was Iran Brown, who was 13 when he was critically wounded outside his Bowie, Md., school. He was released from a hospital last month and appeared with first lady Laura Bush on Thursday as she vis-

ited hospitalized children.

Prosecutors and defense attorneys opposed putting TV cameras in the courtroom for Muhammad's trial. Prosecutor Paul Ebert said the coverage would detract from courtroom decorum. He has said his experience with

Lorena Bobbitt penis-slitting trial, which was televised, convinced him that TV cameras are problematic.

"The court well knows that at one point in time I had no objection to live coverage, but it changed my mind based on my personal experience," he said. "Witnesses, for lack of a better word, tend to ham it up."

Barbara Van Gelder of the news directors association disagreed with the comparison between this case and the Bobbitt case. "This is not a celebrity matter," she said.

The judge said he would allow a still camera on a day-to-day basis. Defense attorneys Paul Greenspun and Jonathan Shapiro had objected that; Ebert did not.

Greenspun and Shapiro had argued in newspapers that TV cameras could lead to sensational media coverage that would taint the jury pool and deny Muhammad the right to a fair trial.

"Although an extensive, legitimate public interest exists in this case and it is understandable that the public might want to watch this trial, the court cannot ignore the constitutional rights of the accused," the attorneys wrote.

"Witnesses, for lack of a better word, tend to ham it up."

— Paul Ebert, prosecutor

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